

Letter from the Teepee

This time, the cowboys and Indians are in it together. Words and art by Gary Morton.

Friends,

As I write this, I am camped at a remote place called Lower Elk on the Mescalero Apache Reservation. It is a peaceful, quiet, and sometimes lonesome place. I am surrounded by some of God's finest creation but it is also a rough tough place on horses and cowboys. I have been here alone for about six weeks but prior to that there was a crew with me.

Let me take you back to the month of March, my partner and I had leased part of the Apache homelands and were in the process of receiving the first of 4700 Mexican steers. The Reservation is 460,000 acres in

the Sacramento Mountains of southern New Mexico. The elevation ranges from 5,700 feet to 12,000 feet. It is covered with rocks, trees (mostly pine, piñon, and juniper) and grass. The lower elevations even support Spanish dagger and ocotillo. The highest portion is above timberline.

We had a crew of four to start and later there were five. The cattle we care for are good Mexicans, mostly from the state of Sonora. Primarily Charolais cross and presumably yearlings. These cattle came to us weighing about 500 pounds. We kept them in traps while roping and doctoring those that needed it. They were prowled daily and those that were doctored were marked as to the date of treatment. Most recovered and went on to do well.

The Res has little in the way of facilities. Corrals and traps are few and far between. There is housing for tribal members but there is none for nontribal folks like us. Therefore we had camps in three locations for the length of our lease. These camps were scattered from the southeast corner to the northwest corner. Two of these camps contained two hands each and one hand stayed alone at another camp. Camps were sited based on the location of the cattle, the availability of horse traps, and corrals.

Rinconada camp was a small cabin, Lower Indian was a camp trailer, and Lower Elk was a tent camp. Lower Elk is the only camp remaining and I am here trying to gather the last





"A Life Less Ordinary," 30"x40" acrylic by Gary Morton.

of the remnants. This tent camp consisted of two David Ellis wall tents from Colorado. These tents are made of the best canvas available and have a unique A-frame ridgepole system that requires no center pole inside the tent. One tent was used for sleeping quarters and the other was a cook tent. I also had two cowboy teepees, one which I slept in and the other was used for storage.

Since the crew is no longer here, I have moved into the cook tent. This one is equipped with a wood-burning cylinder stove, which can make tent living tolerable. March and April weather included several snows and now in October and November it is snowing again. Other than the obvious discomfort, the snow can be helpful in finding remnants.

At this point I should tell you about the Mescalero Apache people and their management of their land. All Indian lands are sovereign nations; this status is well understood and highly valued by the Indian people. They protect their sovereignty vigorously. While reservation land is administered by the Bureau of Indian

Affairs, the Indians have the authority to manage their lands with little outside interference. Consequently, the forest on the reservation is much better managed than the surrounding land managed by the Forest Service. Timber is harvested, undergrowth is controlled by an active thinning and burning program, and grazing is considered good for the land.

The Res is watered mostly by wells and pipelines. This



infrastructure has suffered the effects of time, multiple managers, and too little maintenance. Cattle manager Jimmy Clark has done a good job of overseeing the restoration of wells and pipelines to water wildlife and livestock. The reservation is home to a large elk population that is well known among hunters for producing large bulls.

The tribe maintains a herd of mother cows which is cared for by Indian cowboys. Wild horses are abundant on the Res and the horse remains a revered part of Mescalero culture. I remember asking my friend Max Evans, author of many books, including "The Rounders" and "Hi Lo Country," if he had any advice about my adventure to the Apache lands. He said, "Indians have always respected a good cowboy, it's the closest thing left to their heritage."

He was right; we got along real well with most. There is a faction of the Indian people who do not trust outsiders, and given their history, it is understandable. I feel we have a lot in common with the Indians—our government tried to elimi-

nate them, and now the government is trying to eliminate rural folks in general. I might point out that the government was not successful then and it won't be now. Our individual states could learn something from the Native Americans about sovereign states' rights.

Our intention was to show a handsome profit at the end of the season. This was a gamble on our part and, as we all know, sometimes gamblers lose. What we got was one heck of an experience. I am richer because of my nine months on the reservation. We saw a wild land that few have seen, and not only did we see it, we lived and worked there. There is satisfaction in getting the job done in tough circumstances and we had plenty of those. More often than not, we trotted over high mountains and across rough canyons before we could even start the work at hand. Many days turned into nights before we unsaddled. The cowboy crew rose to the occasion without complaint. When things got tough, one of the guys would always say, "but don't we get to work in a wonderful place."

"The Crush of Thunder," 24"x36" acrylic by Gary Morton.





"First Day of Spring," 12"x13-1/2" watercolor by Gary Morton.

It was quite a thrill to witness the elk and wild horses be wild. Bears and rattlers visited our camp more than once. Saddle horses joined the wild bunch for a while, but returned to us. I made friendships that will last a lifetime. We didn't fill our sacks with gold, but what we got was much more valuable. Are we going to return? I'll let you know when the last of the remnants are gathered.



Happy Trails,

Gary Morton

Gary Morton lives in Logan, N.M. Check <garymortonart.com>.